The relationship between the supervisors and the supervisee: Experiences of PhD completers

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Abstract: *There is a growing pool of literature addressing doctoral students' experiences, especially how the supervisory relationship prompted their poor wellbeing during their study. The purpose of this article is to offer additional critical discussion on PhD completers' experiences, and to examine the influence that their supervisors had on completing their thesis. A qualitative approach to research is applied to capture the experiences of eight PhD students, who were also senior lecturers in various higher education institutions, and who recently completed their studies in the United Kingdom. Data collected from semi-structured interview were analysed using a constructionist narrative approach, where stories were co-constructed between the participants and the researchers. Our research findings show that for some of these completers, success was not merely based on their individual determination, nor was the role of supervisors, but support from their family and friends. This research offers an insight into the positive and negative experiences of PhD completers which may help supervisors and other academic colleagues in universities in England and globally, on how to support students and how to be part of a successful PhD completion team.*

Keywords: *PhD completers; Supervisory role; Emotionality;*

1. Introduction

A PhD in the UK context is a research degree and is the highest award available at university level. The PhD study is based around a substantial research project on an area of academic interest, typically up to 100,000 words in length, written as a thesis which then must be defended in an oral examination in front of a panel of experts. Students are assigned a supervisor (or supervisors) and the duration of a PhD is typically three years full-time and up to six years part-time (Philips and Johnson, 2022). According to HESA (2019/20) the uptake of PhD studies in the UK increased by 4,500 from 98,525 in 2015/16 to 102,030 in 2018/19. This was a gradual, yet steady increase. However, this figure dipped in 2019/20 by 9% to 101,350. This interruption in the growth of PhD candidates can be contributed to the Covid-19 pandemic, when individuals were concerned about protecting their finances, as opposed to investing in PhD studies.

Sverdlik's et al. (2018) research in the USA reported a similar trend, that there was an increase in enrolments to the PhD programme between 1998 and 2010. Their study focused on determining the factors that motivated students to succeed and the factors that featured in students dropping out of the programme. They noted that the dropout rate over the last 50 years on the programme was high, at over 50%. Sverdlik's et al. (2018) research concluded that the single most influencing external factor, which determined the success of the PhD student, was the relationship that they had with their supervisor.

Generally, the context of research on students in higher education has mainly focused on undergraduates, especially relating to motivation, achievement and their well-being (Kwan, 2009; Mikuska, 2016). Although, there is a growing pool of literature addressing PhD and doctoral students' experiences, this topic is largely overlooked; therefore, this article offers an insight into eight PhD completers, who were also senior lecturers in various higher education institutions, in England. As part of the participants roles at the university, they were offered an opportunity to enrol on the PhD programme. With a competitive labour market (Morrison, 2012), they all took up this opportunity in order to gain higher and specialist qualification as well as to preserve their current job.

2. What the literature tells us

Kwan (2009) stated that one of the major tasks in a PhD undertaking is reading in preparation for the thesis. Students need to be prepared to read extensively and thoroughly to collect ideas that can inform their studies and that can be used to construct the literature review and other parts in their thesis. However, undertaking PhD studies while being employed full-time can be a source of difficulties. For example, Ali and Kohun (2006) examined the postgraduate experience affecting the progress and completion of research degrees, and stated that there are two main factors influencing students' experiences: university factors and student factors. They suggested that university factors typically include fitting in with the supervisor and institutional (particularly departmental) expectations and regulations. On the other hand, student factors often include demographic characteristics, disciplinary background, and ability, as well as students' personal life constructions (for example financial support, living arrangements, number of dependents, etc.). Phillips and Johnson (2022) also identified factors that can be readily categorised as external and internal to the student. External factors are all relationships and structures, which involve individuals, resources, and institutions outside the student that may either directly or indirectly impact PhD progress. These include supervision, personal and

social lives, the department and socialisation, and financial support opportunities. Conversely, internal factors concentrate on inner processes (for example psychological or/and mental processes), which are directly associated with academic work, specifically motivation, writing skills, self-regulatory strategies, and academic identity. An additional factor was highlighted by Heath's (2010) quantitative study on PhD students' views of supervision. This study illustrated the decreasing frequency of formal meetings between students and supervisors; however, a shift towards an increase of meetings by the end of the supervision was observed (Heath, 2010).

Ali and Kohen's (2006) study identified that the supervisory relationship between the student and supervisor(s) is one of the most important elements of success to a PhD completer. They reported that the relationship is multi-layered and covered further aspects such as commitment and respect for timeframes, through to reputation, job opportunities and academic relationships of the supervisor. Similarly, Ridgway (2022) drew upon autoethnography to document her PhD experience, and reported the importance of a good relationship between her and her supervisor. Ridgway was consumed with the emotions that she felt through bereavement of losing her parents during her PhD journey. Ridgway (2022) stated that the PhD journey is a 'slow and steady race' (p.3) where time does not stop, and the world continues revolving outside of the student's PhD journey. This includes the external factors that may include the loss of loved ones which may affect the supervisory relationship, as grief effects individuals in different ways.

Ridgway (2022) further argued that some students challenged with bereavement may become withdrawn and display a lack of interest in completing the programme. Whereas, other students may throw themselves into the process in memory of their loved one and dedicate the PhD qualification to them. Either-way, there would be a shift in the students' engagement with the programme. Mikuska's (2014), Sisson and Jackman's (2019) as well as Hunter and Devine's (2016) research highlighted the importance of emotional experiences of research students in Higher Education (HE) as it has an impact on student's achievements, progression and completion. Sisson and Jackman (2016) for example, argued how good and poor psychological wellbeing fluctuates across the timespan of the PhD. While Hunter and Devine (2016) stated that those students who report lower psychological wellbeing are more likely to consider withdrawing from their studies. McCray and Joseph-Richard (2020) argued that participants (completers) in their study had been able to access the universities emotional wellbeing support services. These students had self-referred themselves for this support. However, universities neglected to identify this need and continued to focus on the wellbeing of undergraduate

students. Similarly, Beasy's et al. (2019) research suggested that many PhD students experienced 'shallow support'. Thus, highlighting the importance of developing understanding of the factors that contribute to completing the study, as well as to promoting wellbeing in this population.

3. Methodology

In this study, the aims were to investigate PhD completers' experiences, and to examine the influence that their relationship with their supervisors had on completing their thesis. A qualitative methodological approach was deployed, and after ethical permission was granted by the university ethics committee, careful reference was made to the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association [BERA] (2018); for example, anonymity was exercised, no traceable information was used and data was securely stored.

3.1. Methods of data collection

To address our aims, we collected narratives, using semi-structured interviews, with PhD completers who were, at the time of the interview, working in eight different Higher Education Institution (HEI). The use of semi-structured interviews proved to be an appropriate choice, as it provided us with rich and detailed data. As a support we designed a draft topic guide for us, which formed part of the deliverables of the project. The interview questions were open to allow the participants to tell their stories (Bruner, 2004). The interviews were conducted through face-to-face meetings and through online platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom; they were recorded, transcribed and analysed under two main themes: i) positive experiences of PhD completers ii) negative experiences of PhD completers. Each interview lasted, on average, one hour.

3.2. Researchers

It is also important to address our doctoral experiences. As researchers, we found it difficult to balance between analysing the narratives on the experiences of PhD completers and, at the same time, avoiding making judgements. This was due to our own doctoral experiences and some of the small stories resembling our experiences. Denzin (2014) warned that this kind of subjective reflexivity can be a trap, as it may produce dramatic conceptions of the meaning making and interpretation of the data. Denzin (2014) further suggested that there is no research free from the knowledge of the researcher and therefore, it requires the researcher to be aware of their

own subjectivity and how it is created. To overcome this challenge, we followed the suggestion made by Drake (2010: 88) to apply 'reflexivity in action'. Therefore, we as the researchers, needed to reflect on 'what frames [our] seeing' and critically look at what we chose to make visible in our analysis of the data.

4. Data analysis – small stories

Narrative analysis was applied by grouping the themes under the two main aims of the project. We employed a constructionist narrative approach where stories are understood as co-constructed or dialogically constructed between the participant and the researcher with elements of constant change. Esin et al. (2014: 205) stated that "rather than reading them [the stories] as finished products of particular circumstances they may change over time." Esin et al. (2014: 204) further argued that data analysis is conceptualised as an ongoing complex process through which multiple layers of "told small stories" focusing on "the participants' self-generating meaning" are considered. An important part of the approach was the power relation between the researched and researcher, the data and its interpretation. In order to address how narratives were co-constructed, Bamberg and Geogakopoulou's (2008) concept of small stories were employed. Their argument was to understand 'small stories' by moving away from a more traditional metanarrative approaches as they act as a structural and linear ordering of events. In contrast, small stories are conceptualised as 'interactive engagements' where researchers construct meaning making enabling a focus on how interviewees are positioned by the narrator (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008). Interactive engagements facilitate co-construction on multiple levels; including how the researched co-construct their narrative together with the listener/researcher. However, only the interaction between the two is important, but emphasis is played on how the story is co-constructed by the researcher in connection with their own life experiences. On a wider level, co-construction includes how narratives connect to the metanarratives in society (Harris et al., 2001). Nutbrown (2011: 243) further pointed out that the use of small stories enables the researcher to take a 'reflexive stance' 'providing an opportunity, self-consciously, to ask questions, give account, wonder, push and prod'. Therefore, employing a small story approach was a way of addressing how our qualitative data was understood by us, the researchers.

5. Positive experiences of PhD completers

This part of the paper addresses the positive experiences of PhD student completers, which gives an insight to why participants complete their thesis despite facing difficulties.

> *After the very first meeting with my supervisor, she went out for a run and said she thought my PhD had legs…it could run somewhere! That comment I still reflect on and that has a positive effect on my mental health. If I reflect further, the thesis has kept running, it has never stopped, I have never stopped believing in it and completing it. It is my race. I have ownership over every run I have ever done, and over every second, every word of the PhD... I have learned that the PhD is not anybody else's race, it is mine and having that realisation dawned on me again probably about half way through.*

This small story showed that this particular student was able to latch onto a vital initial comment made by the supervisor, as a guide, focus and inspiration, throughout the PhD journey. This endorsement of the research became an unshakable view, forming the positive foundations. Regardless of any future comments, this student had carved out a coping mechanism for this long research journey, based on the research having legs to carry them through the process and over the finish-line. The feeling of slow and 'steady race' has been addressed by Ridgway (2022) as well as how students develop resilience (McCray and Joseph-Richards, 2020). The story indicates that while the journey is 'lonely', the supervisor's comment made a significant impact on this student, helping them to build resilience. The following small story shows a similar experience:

> *The characteristics of the relationship between me and my primary supervisor are energy, positive feedback and a sense of humour…all elements of a good run. Hearing positive comments as I leave the office after PhD supervision are essential and I model my own supervisory role in the same way.*

In this small story, a very effective way of instilling motivation into the process by the supervisor was discussed. Both humour and a positive last note, upon leaving a setting are tools used to provide motivation and encouragement to students. However, the following small story alluded to a less positive relationship with the supervisor(s). Yet, positive experiences can be harnessed at the final stage of the PhD journey. This case demonstrates Sisson and Jackman (2016) suggestion of good and poor psychological wellbeing that fluctuates across the timespan of the PhD:

My only positive experience was my viva. The feedback they [examiners] gave me, their, professional approach, debates and constructive conversations, thoughts exchange was really great. It was everything that my supervisors couldn't and didn't offer.

Here, this particular student was able to salvage some meaning to the external process of guidance and direction. They side-stepped their supervisory relationship, by reflecting on the key stage of the research, the viva, which would provide the most beneficial feedback that they needed to complete.

Phillips and Johnson (2022) identified relationships as important external factors that helps students to complete their study, such as forming a lifelong friendship:

When I started the programme, I met some lovely colleagues, who became live long friends.

Similarly, another participant has talked about the importance of social interaction with other PhD students seeking encouragement and professional support as well as from family and friends. It was reported that for example, informal chats about the research and which kind of support they have received from their supervisors, played a significant factor in completing the thesis. This is when co-construction of the stories between the researchers and researched becomes unavoidable:

I loved meeting new people, people with similar passion, with whom you then form a strong bond, and with some of them a good friendship, an understanding ... someone you can tell your secrets about yourself, your doubts in your ability, but also to trust to offload all those feelings, positive but also negative, was so important to me. Someone who listens, who understand what I'm talking about. And then the encouragement that 'you can do it, you are so clever ...'

This small story resonates with Nutbrown's (2011) self-reflective qualitative research approach and the importance of reflexivity and the need for more reflective enquiry within the field education. Building on Nutbrown's (2011) suggestion, we reflected on our own doctoral journey as we re-lived our experiences by listening to this small story. Both of us had shared similar experiences, whereby we utilised other benefits available in the PhD programme, such as collaborations outside of the process, which allowed us to keep a part of this important PhD journey alive. Due to shared experiences, our friendship was born. The encouragement and support we provided each other gave us the strength to continue with our study. Therefore,

through co-constructions and co-reflections our life experiences intersect with those of our participants and their narratives.

6. Negative experiences of PhD completers

The data revealed more negative experiences than positive ones. Some students struggled to understand and manage their relationship with their supervisor. They desperately tried to construct the relationship as value.

> *I don't want to make a complaint, you know… I have always seen a supervisor as like a critical friend, they were testing you, when you were asking the questions; 'why did you say that?', or 'why did you do that?' you know, but I didn't really gain from that, they cast unnecessary questions you know… I just wanted a general direction and I will work out what to do by myself. So, I did most of the things on my own, as often I waited months and months for feedback. For me personally this is how it worked…. It took me probably longer like this by about 2-3 years.*

This small story appeared to be a common thread in the data, whereby unnecessary delay was caused in receiving feedback from the supervisor, which hindered progression or earlier completion. This small story resonates with the study carried out by Beasy et al. (2019) which suggested that many PhD students experienced shallow support. However, disclosure from one participant, in this study, about the unequal relationship they had with their supervisor was alarming.

> *She put me in a very awkward and compromising position early in the supervisory relationship. Knowing my background, she asked me to help her with her legal applications. I felt threatened. From her character and personality. I knew that if I refused to help her, this would have an adverse impact on the supervisory relationship and my work.*

This particular example showed the issue of power in the supervisory relationship, when the personal life takes over the professional. This situation demonstrated the supervisor's insecurities, and the need to reconstruct the superior role in the relationship. It could be argued that here the supervisors doubted their own ability to conduct the supervisory role adequately by questioning the student's ability to be good at their role outside of the PhD research.

> *My supervisor was nothing short of a nightmare, I was traumatised by the experience. I was angered by the process and what I had to endure. There were no*

> *checks and balances, and little opportunities to feedback to programme leaders. The programme itself was mismanaged with staff departing and course leaders changing frequently.*

This small story showed very powerful emotions and highlighted the inefficiencies of the programme. This highlighted the struggles that the university suffered in its ability to deliver a robust programme. Professional programmes at PhD levels are often neglected, as they are seen as self-serving and self-sufficient. Safeguarding is not a requirement at HE level, so PhD students are not afforded that protection.

> *In three months I changed supervisors twice. First, there were supervisors 1 and 2 and then supervisor number 3 came in in place of number 1. And now there are 2 and number 4. As you can imagine I often felt despised and I couldn't understand why. The atmosphere became more and more sinister, as in one of those science fiction movies where everyone all of a sudden start acting weird and you can't think of any explanation. I felt scared and angry. There was time I couldn't stop crying. I thought about quitting my PhD, since nobody seemed to care except me and a few friends who encouraged me to keep going.*

In this small story the thought of withdrawing from the programme arose. This correlated with Hunter and Devine's (2016) study which suggested that those students who report lower psychological wellbeing are more likely to consider withdrawing from their studies. This participant had experienced a number of emotions, initially, stemming from abandonment from their supervisors, which they found difficult to process. This resulted in them feeling ignored and disregarded, which Mikuska (2014) addressed in her study reporting on the importance of emotions in HE and the impact it can make on students' wellbeing.

The most emotionally driven small story was about how this participant managed anger.

> *It took me 9 minutes to burn 9 years of my hard work. Literarily. I lit on fire all the paperwork I found that was to do with my (f...g] PhD. It was perfect emotional healing process for me, this is how I processed painful PhD experiences.*

By the end of the PhD journey, so much tension and unpleasant memories had built up, that the only way to deal with these emotions was likely to be destructive. It was explained that to deal with anger, the paperwork had to be burnt. This symbolic destruction released emotions that had built up and erased unwanted memories, which made way for the much-needed healing process.

7. Conclusions

Like most relationships, the supervisory relationship is complex and not without its impediments. However, the dependency of students upon their supervisors makes the relationship, unbalanced, unequal and fragile. The key to a successful supervisory relationship is for the supervisor to prioritise the future direction of the research for the student and steer away from redundant relationships and factors that prolong insufficiency and distrust. Our recommendation is that universities need to invest into the supervisory role, by introducing a rigorous selection process, compulsory continuing training for future and present supervisors, and an opportunity for students to provide feedback on their supervisors throughout their PhD journey. Therefore, more research is needed to highlight the issue of supervision in order to detect training needs.

Students should be encouraged to share, in a safe space, their PhD experiences, and in particular, their supervisory experiences with their peers. This would offer support and a platform to exchange ideas and solutions to resolve issues and enhance the PhD experience. This would also create a self-devised safeguarding community for PhD students outside of the HE institution. This added layer of protection may lead to an increase in the uptake of PhD research studies. Hopefully, future supervisors reading this paper will be mindful of their supervisory position and the impact that they have on PhD students during their PhD journey.

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